CHAPTER TWENTY

Atheists Who Found God: Camus, Sartre, and Flew

Atheism is a long, hard, cruel business.

—Jean-Paul Sartre

Like the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, whom we will discuss in more detail later, there have been many great thinkers and artists for whom a world without God is no happy thing, but rather is simply what they have come to think is likely true, however unpleasant. In other words, they are far too thoughtful to leap for joy like the New Atheists, to whom a godless world seems nothing more than a golden ticket to an amusement park of guilt-free pleasures. Thomas and others seem to be haunted by the greater sadness of the idea, and seem genuinely to long for meaning, but having found none, soldier on in the midst of the bleakness, continuing to look for signs that perhaps they are mistaken.

The great filmmaker Ingmar Bergman was like this. Anyone who has seen his masterpiece, *The Seventh Seal*, knows that it depicts the prospect of a world devoid of God as terrifying. Bergman's questions about God are especially profound in this film, which is set in the Middle Ages during an episode of the Black Death, so that it has a foreboding and apocalyptic feel. Flagellants wander through the streets, hoping to purge themselves of whatever it is that has afflicted everyone, and in one scene an unbalanced young woman accused of witchcraft is taken to her

execution at the stake. The film's principal figure is Antonius Block, a knight returned from the Crusades played by Max von Sydow. The knight is looking for meaning and longs to hear from God. The film's title refers to the passage from the Book of Revelation, which is mentioned at the film's beginning and end: "When He opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour."[1] The theme of God's silence is at the center of the film, and the knight encounters various figures, none of whom give him the answers he is looking for. He is also engaged in a chess match with Death, a grim white-faced figure who shadows him throughout the film.

But at one point Block stumbles across a young family and their infant, who treat him to a picnic of wild strawberries and milk. For the knight, this family and this time with them is a powerful antidote to the otherwise howling emptiness of the universe around him. Clearly Bergman too sees in this innocent trio something powerful, a clue that there is goodness in the universe, that we are not alone. The knight says as much when he thanks the couple for their kindness to him. "I'll carry this memory between my hands," he tells them, "as if it were a bowl filled to the brim with fresh milk. And it will be an adequate sign—it will be enough for me." Although Bergman has a reputation as someone for whom God is silent, he doesn't give the impression that this is satisfying or preferable to a God whom we know is there. Like Dylan Thomas he seems to believe that God must be there and that there must be goodness in the world, as evidenced by this sweet family.

Although principally known as a comedian, the filmmaker Woody Allen falls into a similar category. He has often spoken of his deep admiration for Bergman and has obviously been influenced by Bergman's work. In numerous interviews he has made perfectly plain that he is an atheist, and that like the French existentialists he realizes this means that life is absurd; but he is manifestly unhappy about this and says as much. Unlike the New Atheists, he and Bergman recognize the sorrow of a world without God or meaning, and one gets the idea that he thinks those tickled at the idea of such a world as foolish as those who are sure there is a God. Allen doesn't know how to deal with what

[1] Revelation 8:1.

he feels is the truth of the matter except forgetting about it as best he can in staying busy, or occasionally by dealing with it directly in his art. His 1987 film *Crimes and Misdemeanors* more than any other directly addresses the big questions concerning whether there is a God who watches us. Anyone who sees that film can never think of Allen as being among those who hopes there is no God.

In this chapter we will look briefly at three atheist philosophers who—like Thomas, Bergman, and Allen—looked deeply enough at the implications of a world without God to become displeased with it, and who eventually found themselves moving toward the other side of the question. These three philosophers were among the most famous atheists of their time, but each in his own way as a result of probing the question seems eventually to have found his way to genuine belief.[2]

As with much in this book, these stories can be researched and the facts confirmed, but except for the story of Antony Flew, very few have heard them. News of Albert Camus's pilgrimage doesn't seem to have been made public until forty years after his death.

Jean-Paul Sartre

Certainly one of the most famous atheists of the twentieth century—and probably the best-known philosopher—was the existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre's best-known books are *Nausea* and *Being and Nothingness*. In the play "No Exit," he famously wrote, "*L'enfer c'est les autres*," which is usually translated as, "Hell is other people." He was a

[2] A fourth atheist philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre, bears mention in this grouping too. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* regards MacIntyre as "one of the great moral thinkers of the late 20th and early 21st centuries." Indeed, his 1981 book *After Virtue* is generally considered one of the most important books of moral philosophy of the twentieth century. Early in his career MacIntyre was a committed Marxist and in the 1950s was a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, and an atheist. But while in his fifties he found himself trying to convince his students that Thomas Aquinas's philosophy—called Thomism—was wrong, but by the end of this process he had himself wended his way to Christianity, to which he converted. He had come to see that the Enlightenment project that attempted to get to morality via pure reason was destined to fail.

Jean-Paul Sartre.

rigorous intellectual who saw through much of modern bourgeois life and condemned the majority of people for living thoughtlessly, for conforming to a way of life that contradicted itself and which he called living in "Bad Faith" (*mauvaise foi*). But what did it mean to live "authentically"? That is what he meant to understand, and it wasn't at all easy, nor did he claim it to be, and he is known to have assuaged his own *weltschmerz* with alcohol and an endless cavalcade of women.

Sartre had an "open" relationship with his fellow existentialist Simone de Beauvoir, whom he met in 1929 and who is most famous for her feminist manifesto, *The Second Sex*. According to the writer Louis Menand, the attraction toward Sartre was not purely physical. Menand unkindly described Sartre as "about five feet tall . . . he dressed in over-sized clothes, with no sense of fashion; his skin and teeth suggested an indifference to hygiene. He had the kind of aggressive male ugliness that can be charismatic. . . ." Sartre and de Beauvoir continued their curious relationship for decades, during which they unsurprisingly slept with innumerable others. Menand says that words "constituted [Sartre's] principal means of seduction: his physical approaches were on the order of groping in restaurants and grabbing kisses in taxis." Together Sartre and de Beauvoir vigorously challenged the norms of bourgeois French society, as though sleeping around were an act of exceptional moral courage.

Both predictably became devoted Marxists, and for a time Sartre was a great defender of Stalin, even after the chilling horrors of the Gulag became known. In the 1960s, Sartre traveled to Cuba to admire Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, the latter of whom he fatuously described as "the most complete human being of our age" and "the era's perfect man." The historian Philip Johnson accused Sartre's works of leading to and

inspiring the murderous regime of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge, a claim that is unfortunately difficult to discount, and impossibly unpleasant to contemplate. But yes, ideas have consequences, and for intellectual titans like Sartre those consequences are often for *les autres* one will never meet.

Sartre took many other radical positions, including in 1964 publishing his autobiography, *The Words*, in which he condemned all literature as simply another bourgeois way of avoiding reality. When that very same year he was—rather awkwardly, one imagines—chosen as the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, his embarrassment was pronounced. Of course Sartre pointedly declined to accept the honor, setting the table for Marlon Brando and others to see such awards as opportunities to punish the public with their political views. In 1977 Sartre and de Beauvoir joined other French intellectuals such as Paul-Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Alain Robbe-Grillet in signing an open letter calling for the ending of "Age of Consent Laws," arguing for the "right of twelve-year-olds to have sexual relations with anyone they chose," doubtless giving such as Roman Polanski the idea that in time everyone would see the light and reject the antique taboo against child rape.

And yet there were hints throughout Sartre's life that perhaps he was not quite convinced of what he publicly claimed. Sartre seemed to be too thoughtful and searching to glibly accept atheism as an unbridled good. In an interview with *Il Politecnico* in 1946, he said that atheism was the idea "that man is the creator, and that he's abandoned and alone in the world." He went on to say that this belief was "not a happy optimism, but in its deepest sense, is a desperation."

In *Le Monde* in 1949 his fellow atheist philosopher Albert Camus said that in Sartre there was a great deal of "atavistic antagonism towards god." According to Camus, "Sartre's excessively rabid stand against god is an ontological proof of his deep-down faith in some creator. The man (Sartre) is a closet believer who'll die not as an atheist but as a believer." It was a shocking thing to say at the time, but in time would prove to be shockingly prescient.

It was not only his friend Camus who believed Sartre was somehow haunted by the idea of God. The philosopher and Greek Orthodox theologian Christos Yannaras also thought that Sartre was not the atheist he claimed to be and proclaimed him "the most important theologian of the West's philosophical tradition." Sartre's essential failure to develop a morality apart from God eventually led to despair and anguish. His was a rigorous atheism, so that he felt the burden of a life without God. In his autobiography, he put it bluntly: "Atheism is a long, hard, cruel business."

Sartre continued to try to work out a philosophical system that made sense of the human condition in a world without God, and in 1974 hired a young man named Benny Lévy as his private secretary. But Lévy was an Egyptian Maoist who during those six years with Sartre began to explore his own Judaism, and it seems clear that in their conversations Sartre's thinking about God was reawakened, causing him to rethink many of his earlier views.

In 1980, the last year of Sartre's life, Lévy conducted an interview with him, about which Father Stephen Wang—a Catholic priest and philosophy professor in England—has written:

> In these final philosophical reflections Sartre seems to repudiate much of his life's work and embrace ideas such as the need for an objective morality, the transcendent end of the human person, and a quasi-messianic notion of how society can find perfection. When pressed, he insisted that these conversations did indeed express his opinions, and that they were not foisted upon him by Lévy.[3]

If this wasn't clear enough, Sartre summed it up by saying: "I don't feel I am the product of Chance, a speck of dust in the universe, but someone who was expected, prepared, prefigured. In short, a being that

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[3] Father Stephen Wang, "Sartre's Faith," Bridges and Tangents, February 21, 2010, https://bridgesandtangents.wordpress.com/2010/02/21/sartres-faith.

could be here thanks only to a Creator. And this idea about a creator is referring to God."[4] Can we imagine that Jean-Paul Sartre said such things?

Of course his many friends and devotees were outraged at this news. It seems especially to have set Ms. de Beauvoir's teeth on edge, and she wrote bitterly about what she considered Sartre's personal betrayal of her and all who had followed his work, saying he had fallen "into superstition."

Sartre spent his whole life trying to philosophically work out how it was possible to go on in a world without God. He had never established that there was no God, nor claimed to—which is something no one can do anyway, despite claims to the contrary. But at the end of his life he seemed to have come to the end of his search and was able to accept what he previously could not. But why?

This is of course one of the things about so-called deathbed conversions. As much as they are often discounted as fearful and desperate leapings toward some chimera, they are often the opposite. Dr. Samuel Johnson famously said: "When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully." The conversion of someone close to death is often evidence that they at last had the ability to think clearly, with none of the distractions of life, such as having to face friends who disagree with you or having to give up some of the things you fear turning to God might mean giving up.

When one is thinking less of one's position in society and more about what is increasingly unavoidable, one has less to lose in facing some things. It doesn't take the great courage it might have when one was in the swim of adulation for dancing with the Spirit of the Age. One can finally be free to see things as they appear to be. So it was with Sartre, who at the end of his life understood that it was not possible to believe in any kind of morality without God, nor could he any longer believe his existence was the product of blind, random forces.

Nonetheless, de Beauvoir was unable to accept this news and seems to have been personally offended, saying: "How could I explain this senile

[4] Ibid.

act of a turncoat?" But there was more to be scandalized about. On Father Wang's blog, a certain M. A. Dean claimed that at the time of Sartre's death, when Wang was a student at Notre Dame, the writer and theologian Father John S. Dunne personally told him that a priest friend of Dunne's "had been called to Sartre's deathbed, where the noted atheist confessed his sins and came into the Church."

Albert Camus

Albert Camus, 1947. *Henri Cartier-Bresson Magnum Photos*

The oldest American institution in all of Europe is the American Church in Paris, which stands on the Quai d'Orsay. Howard Mumma, a forty-something Yale-educated minister, had landed the plum position of guest preacher there for several summers in the late 1950s. For the first month of Sundays, though, Mumma had no idea that Albert Camus was in his congregation.

Like Jean-Paul Sartre, Camus was a French existentialist, though he always rejected the term, preferring to style himself as an advocate of "Absurdism"—the idea that life is meaningless. But he believed that there was no excuse for nihilism and tried to find a way forward in a universe bereft of God and meaning. Camus's most famous works are *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger*, and he was so celebrated during his short life that he won the Nobel Prize at the age of forty-four in 1957.

For Camus, the central issue of existentialism was what to do about it. And of course the most fundamental question—given what he saw as the utter meaninglessness of life—was whether to commit suicide. To be or not to be. Camus viewed suicide as arising naturally as a possible solution to the absurdity of life. Unlike the cocksure New Atheists, Camus did not shy away from the ramifications and implications of what he had come to believe.

While Sartre was unconscionably pro-communist, Camus despised the Soviets for their cruelty and totalitarianism and fought bravely in the French resistance during Germany's occupation. Like Sartre, he was dedicated to working out a morality—or the possibility of it—in a world without God and meaning. "Is it possible," Camus wondered, "for humans to act in an ethical and meaningful manner, in a silent universe?" But like Sartre, his intellectual chin-pulling on these grave issues did not prevent him from being a notorious womanizer, and his marriage suffered.

Howard Mumma recalls his own arrival in the vast and well-appointed Paris church that first summer in the mid-1950s. There was a huge crowd, so he was naturally surprised and excited, but soon realized it was the organist they had come to see. Marcel Dupré was a renowned virtuoso of the instrument and would be there three more Sundays. On the fifth Sunday the size of the crowd diminished dramatically, and when the service was over Mumma walked to the church steps to greet the parishioners, as was his habit. This time he observed a group of them surrounding someone, to whom they were extending their bulletins for autographs. It was Albert Camus.

Camus introduced himself to Mumma, confessing that he had come the first four Sundays only to hear Dupré but today he was there for Mumma's sermon, and asked whether they might have lunch the next day. He told Mumma he had come to church "because I am searching for something I do not have, something I cannot even define."

In his book *Albert Camus and the Minister,* Mumma details how over the course of many meals and conversations, Camus made it clear he was not happy believing there was no God and that the universe had no meaning. It seemed utterly unacceptable:

> Something is dreadfully wrong. I am a disillusioned and exhausted man. I have lost faith, lost hope, ever since the rise of Hitler. Is it any wonder that at my age, I am looking for something to believe in? To lose one's life is only a little thing.

> But, to lose the meaning of life, to see our reasoning disappear, is unbearable. It is impossible to live a life without meaning.[5]

In contrast to the New Atheists, Camus saw what it meant if the world were devoid of God and meaning, and he was hoping to be wrong.

In another conversation he told Mumma of his friendship with the French philosopher and mystic Simone Weil, whom he met in 1939, and how her own faith journey from atheism had influenced him. "I wish I could find whatever it was that moved her thinking," Camus said. He went on to say that his well-known belief in a meaningless universe was no longer certain, in part because of his friendship with Weil. He confided in his friend:

> I have made a great deal of money because I have been somehow able to articulate man's disillusionment . . . I have written things that have meant a great deal to many people. . . . I touched something in them because they identified in my writings the anguish and despair that they all felt. I spoke to the meaninglessness and uncertainty, the basic tenets of which I am uncertain I still believe.[6]

Camus felt a responsibility to these readers and fans. He could no longer stand behind what he had written, but he did not know exactly what to say or to believe either. He was clearly on a serious search.

When Mumma learned that the only Bible Camus owned was a Latin Vulgate, which he had been given as a child by his mother and the parish priest, Mumma made a point of tracking down a Bible in French and gave it to him. Camus leapt in and began reading the Pentateuch, which they discussed.

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[5] Howard E. Mumma, *Albert Camus and the Minister* (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete, 2000), 14.

[6] Ibid., 47.

At the end of the summer, just before Mumma was to return to the United States, Camus said: "I am not a sentimental man, but I want you to know that your sermons and our all too few conversations have meant a great deal to me."

Mumma did not return to Paris and the American Church for a few years, but he and Camus immediately resumed their friendship, dining together and always talking about God. Toward the end of that summer of 1959, Camus suddenly asked whether Mumma performed baptisms. It seems obvious Camus knew his friend would soon be leaving again and wanted to make some kind of commitment. "The reason I have been coming to church is because I am seeking. . . ." he said.

> I'm almost on a pilgrimage—seeking something to fill the void that I am experiencing, and no one else knows. Certainly the public, and the readers of my novels, while they see that void, are not finding the answers in what they are reading. But deep down, you are right. I am searching for something that the world is not giving me. . . .
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> Since I have been coming to church, I have been thinking a great deal about the idea of a transcendent, something that is other than this world. It is something that you do not hear much about today, but I am finding it. I am hearing about it here, in Paris, within the walls of the American Church.[7]

At some point Mumma learned that Camus had not stopped reading the Bible. Far from it, he said he had read the Old Testament at least three times and had been making notes.

> Since I have been reading the Bible I sense that there is something—I don't know if it is personal or if it is a great idea or powerful influence—but there is something that can bring meaning to my life. I certainly don't have it, but it is there. On Sunday mornings I hear that the answer is God. . . . You have

[7] Ibid., 86–87.

> made it very clear to me on Sunday mornings, Howard, that we are not the only ones in this world. There is something that is invisible. We may not hear the voice, but there is some way in which we can come aware that we are not the only ones in the world and that there is help for all of us.[8]

As the conversation continued, Camus said he identified strongly with Nicodemus, the Jewish religious leader who came secretly to speak to Jesus at night. Camus said that like Nicodemus he was confused about Christianity and what it meant to be "born again." So Mumma asked him what Jesus's reply to Nicodemus was, and Camus remembered it all, repeating it with enthusiasm.

As a pastor, Howard Mumma could see that his friend was getting serious about all this, so he spoke about what it means to be born again. "It is to wipe the slate clean," Mumma said, "to receive forgiveness. It is to receive forgiveness because you have asked God to forgive you of all past sins, so that the guilt, the concerns, the worries, and the mistakes that we have made in the past are forgiven and the slate is truly wiped clean. . . ."

Mumma went on some more, and then he told Camus: "You are seeking the presence of God himself." Mumma remembers he was himself nervous at that moment. He writes: "Albert looked me squarely in the eye and with tears in his eyes, said, 'Howard, I am ready. I want this. This is what I want to commit my life to.'"

At that point Mumma might easily have led Camus in what is often called "the Sinner's Prayer." But being a rather high-church Methodist, he didn't think along such lines. Instead, the conversation devolved to baptism and whether it was necessary for Camus to be baptized, since he already had been baptized as a child. Mumma thought that first baptism would suffice. But Camus said that hadn't meant anything. Now he understood what was at stake, and he wanted to be baptized. Mumma then began pressing him on whether he was willing to make a public

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[8] Ibid., 87.

confession of his faith and to join a church. But Camus didn't want to join a church or denomination. He didn't want to attract attention in that way and at that time. He wanted to be baptized by Mumma, but for some reason Mumma demurred, wondering if perhaps Camus was really ready to take such a step. So nothing happened. Camus wished to drive his friend to the airport when it was time to leave, but a special goodbye luncheon at the church had been prepared, and Camus met him at the airport to say goodbye. "My friend, *mon cheri*," Camus said to him, "thank you. I am going to keep striving for the faith."

As it happened, Camus would never be baptized nor have the time to write about what had transpired in his heart and mind, because only a few months later—on January 4, 1960—he was riding in the passenger seat of his publisher's Facel Vega sportscar, speeding toward Paris. Camus had been in his country home in Provence and had sent his two children and his wife of twenty years ahead on the train two days earlier. Though no one knows exactly how, on a long and wide stretch of road the car veered into a plane tree. He was killed instantly, at the age of forty-six.

Perhaps because of his intense privacy regarding such matters, the obituaries written about him did not reflect the journey he had been on to find God. And Mumma did not write of any of it until 2000, when he was himself ninety-two. So until now, most of the world has never heard that one of the world's most public atheists had eventually found his atheism unsatisfactory and had turned toward God.

Antony Flew

Antony Flew was one of the foremost atheists of the twentieth century. He declared himself an atheist at fifteen and went on to a brilliant career in philosophy. While at Oxford in the academic year 1949–50, Flew often attended C. S. Lewis's Socratic Club, and although he thought Lewis "eminently reasonable," was nonetheless unconvinced by his arguments for God. In fact, it was in 1950 that he wrote an essay titled

Antony Flew.

"Theology and Falsification," which ended up becoming the most widely reprinted philosophical publication of the previous fifty years. In 1976, he wrote another landmark work titled *The Presumption of Atheism*. Though often regarded as the leading academic atheist of his time, Flew was never as bitterly polemical as the so-called "New Atheists" who followed him.

"My whole life," he said, "has been guided by the principle of Plato's *Socrates*: Follow the evidence, wherever it leads."[9] But where it eventually led him, to the shock of many of his followers, was to seriously question atheism and then flatly reject it. It was in 2004 that the most famous academic atheist of the century declared that he had come to believe in God. More specifically, he believed in an intelligent Creator of the universe and was now a Deist. The bitter howls of those feeling betrayed by the atheist genius they had followed were not long in coming. That December he wrote: "I have been denounced by my fellow unbelievers for stupidity, betrayal, senility and everything you can think of and none of them have read a word that I have ever written."[10]

The summer following this I found myself at a C. S. Lewis conference in Oxford, England, where in a forum at St. Aldates Church—just across the street from the famous Christ Church Meadow—I got to meet Flew and hear him talk about his conversion. He recounted his repulsion at the idea of a vengeful God who would cast people into eternal tortures and made clear he could not believe in that God, but affirmed his belief in an intelligent Creator—in "the Aristotelian God," as he put it. For him the facts were clear as a bell, and there was no going back. The advances in science over the previous decades—specifically the arguments for the fine-tuned universe—had

[9] Edward Feser, *The Last Superstition: A Refutation of the New Atheism* (St. Augustine's Press, 2010), 2–3.

[10] Ibid., 2.

rendered atheism logically untenable. The attacks continued, but Flew had been around this block and was not about to take them lying down. When Simon Fraser University's Raymond Bradley published his criticisms of Flew's position in George Soros's *Open Society* journal, Flew wrote a letter to the journal calling the piece "extraordinarily offensive" and put Bradley in the category of "a secularist bigot."

Flew was so convinced of the scientific arguments for design that he even took the step in 2006 of signing his name to a letter advising the British government to be willing to include "Intelligent Design" in school curricula. The following year in an interview with the Christian ethicist Benjamin Wiker, Flew spoke of his "growing empathy with the insight of Einstein and other noted scientists that there had to be an Intelligence behind the integrated complexity of the physical Universe."

In 2007, to make his new stance and arguments unmistakably—almost cheekily—clear, he wrote a book titled *There Is a God*, once more explaining that the new scientific evidence showed there was insufficient time for life to come into being from non-life, as he and so many had believed. Others who had achieved top distinction in the academic world, and who had come to Flew's conclusion decades earlier, knew from personal experience that his book would provoke rage. Dr. Francis Collins, called it "[t]owering and courageous... Flew's colleagues in the church of fundamentalist atheism will be scandalized." Nicholas Wolterstorff, Yale's Noah Porter Professor Emeritus of Philosophical Theology and a Christian, called the book "fascinating" and said it would "come as a most uncomfortable jolt to those who were once his fellow atheists." And Dr. Ian H. Hutchinson, the head of MIT's Department of Nuclear Science and Engineering, said the book would "incense atheists who suppose (erroneously) that science proves there is no God." But Flew didn't care whether his new thinking might upset some people, saying "that's too bad" and again directing them to "follow the evidence," as Socrates had suggested.

"The philosophical question," he said, "that has not been answered in origin-of-life studies, is this: How can a universe of mindless matter produce beings with intrinsic ends, self-replication capabilities, and 'coded chemistry'?

Here we are not dealing with biology, but an entirely different category of problem."[11] Flew stands alone in his passage from being one of the most celebrated advocates of atheism to coming to believe in God, daring to say so, and explaining himself publicly.

Because Flew came to faith in God a few years before his death in 2010, and wrote of it, news of his conversion received the attention it deserved. But Camus's and Sartre's conversions were almost entirely unreported. Nonetheless, now we know the whole truth: that these three most famous and most thoughtful philosophers of the twentieth century all found their way beyond atheism and even beyond agnosticism, all the way to God himself.

[11] Michael Ebifegha, *The Darwinian Delusion: The Scientific Myth of Evolutionism* (Bloomington, Indiana: AuthorHouse Publishing, 2011), 255.